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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the hypothesis that the distracting nature of incidental information inherent to television news, combined with the absence of headlines, might result in television viewers remembering less central and more incidental information than they would when reading a newspaper article that uses headlines to condense the central point of a story. Twenty students in a college psychology class viewed a videotape of the first 15 minutes of a television news broadcast, while 20 other subjects read a newspaper constructed by the researchers by transcribing each news story presented in the television broadcast. The subjects were immediately given a multiple choice test, with half of the 30 questions derived from central information and the other half from incidental information. The results indicated that central information was remembered better for print than for television, but the effect was not significant. There was, however, a significant interaction between time and medium. Delay in testing affected recognition of newsprint items more than television items. Recognition for central information was slightly greater for newsprint in the immediate condition, but recognition of incidental information was much greater for television in the delayed testing condition. (HTH)

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Memory for Central and Incidental Information From Newspaper and Television News

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Memory for Central and Incidental Information
from Newspaper and Television News

There is a lack of consistency in the literature concerning memory for information presented in pictorial and written form. Harwood (1951) found greater comprehension of written stories than either audio or videotaped stories. However, Chaiken and Eagley (1976) reported better memory for written material compared to videotaped material only when the material was difficult to understand. More recently, Baggett (1979) compared the comprehension of a written short story with a filmed version of the same story. Baggett suggested that subjects who read the story remembered less because written material includes information about thoughts and intentions of characters and thus requires less cognitive effort from the reader to understand the central points.

This question is relevant to the naturalistic situation of processing news reports from different media. Unlike the short story used in Baggett's study in which there was one central plot with several sub plots, news reports present a series of stories each with central and peripheral information. There are two reasons to expect television will be worse:

1) TV contains incidental information which may distract attention from the central point, and

2) headlines direct a reader to the central point of a story while the information in television news must be extracted without such direction.

Using headlines as a guide, central information may be extracted and remembered better from newspaper accounts than from televised accounts of the same information. The distracting nature of incidental information combined with the absence of headlines may result in the television viewer remembering less central and more incidental information, especially with a long delay before testing. This study was conducted to examine this hypothesis.

Method

The first fifteen minutes of a locally broadcast television newsprogram was videotaped and shown to twenty subjects from an introductory psychology class. The subjects were all residents of a college located in a city different from the one in which the broadcast was originally shown. None of the subjects had seen the broadcast previously. Twenty other subjects read a newspaper which was constructed by the experimenters by transcribing each news story presented in the television broadcast. Immediately following either watching the broadcast or reading the newspaper, subjects were given a thirty question multiple choice test. One half of the questions were derived from central information and the other half from incidental information. Central information was defined by the experimenters as knowledge required to understand the main point of the story. Incidental information was irrelevant to the main point. For example, the cause of a gas explosion was considered central, while the fact that a speaker wore a tie was incidental. Both types of information were present in each form of the story. Two other groups of subjects (20-25 in each) followed the same procedure, however their test was given after a one week delay.

Results

The dependent measure was the number of correct answers to central and incidental questions. The subjects averaged approximately 63% correct answers. A 3-way AVOVA was performed. There were two between factors, time (immediate and delay) and medium (newspaper and TV) and one within factor (central and incidental answers). Results indicate that central information was remembered better for printed news than television. However, this effect was not significant. There was a significant interaction between time and medium ($P < .05$). Delay affected recognition television items less than newsprint. There was also a significant interaction between type of information and type of media ($P < .05$). Recognition for central information was slightly greater for newsprint in the immediate condition. However, recognition

for incidental information was much greater for television in the delay condition. Figure 1 depicts the mean number of correct answers to central and incidental questions by type of media over time (see attached).

Discussion

This investigation was undertaken to examine whether there were differences in th the amount and nature of the information recognized from televised news versus printed news. Results indicated that more incidental information was recognized from televised news than from printed news especially over time, but that there was no reliable difference for central information.

One interpretation of these results is that televised news is accompanied by pictures and personal interviews which may direct attention to peripheral aspects of a story. Central information presented on one track may lack specific reference on the other track. This incidental information could actually interfere with the viewers processing of information relevant to the central point. On the other hand, headlines of newspapers direct a reader to central points in stories causing incidental information to have a less distracting effect. Further experiments are currently underway to test memory for information presented on the soundtrack versus the visual track of a television news program, and to assess the effects of headlines in printed news stories.

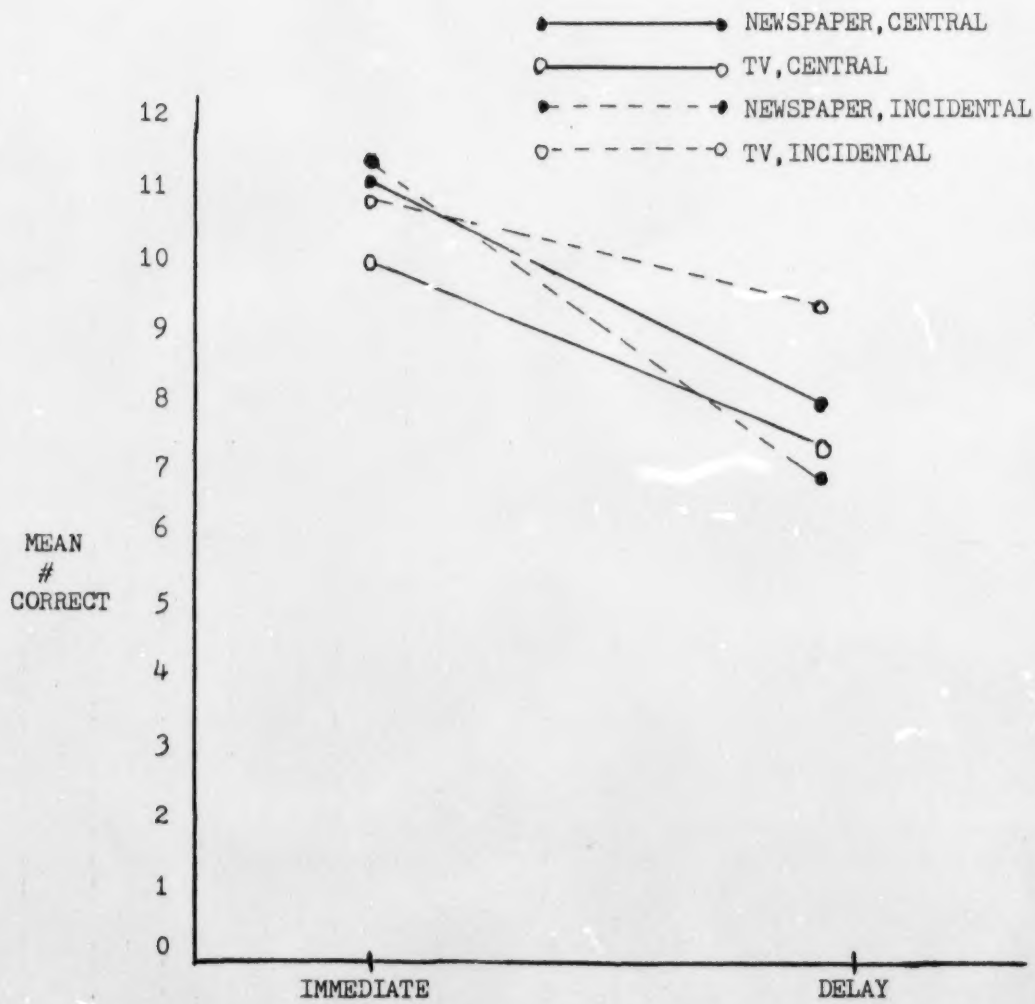

Figure 1: The mean number of correct answers to central and incidental questions by type of media over time

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